

The Shining Sphere at the End of the Tunnel – Eye Floaters and Near-Death Experiences

By Floco Tausin

Persons who were revived after being clinically dead often report unusual and profound perceptions they had in the state of near-death. These experiences defy scientific and religious thinking alike. Some visual elements of near-death experiences (NDE) resemble one particular type of eye floaters, the 'shining structure floaters'. The thesis of this article is that floaters and other entoptic phenomena are phenomena of consciousness which continue to exist in states of near-death – and possibly even beyond death.

What is a Near-Death Experience?

Stories of individuals near to their death are known from many cultures and times. For Western people of past centuries, near-death phenomena attested to the existence of heaven and hell. At the end of the 19th century, such experiences became the focal point of individual scientists' research. But it was only in the second half of the 20th century that this phenomenon came across a wider scientific and public interest. After preliminary work by researchers such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Russell Noyes and Robert Crookall (cp. Corazza 2008), the philosopher and psychiatrist Raymond Moody published his book *Life after life* in 1975. It became a best-seller and initiated the popularization of the subjects of death and dying which were strongly tabooed in

Western societies at that time. People from all social classes were encouraged to share their encounters with death. This development has led to a steady increase of NDE reports in the past thirty years.

According to different surveys (cp. Schick/Vaughn 2010), 18 to 60 percent of the patients having suffered a severe accident or cardiac arrest experience sensory and cognitive impressions during their “clinical death” – impressions that Moody collectively calls “near-death experiences” (NDE). In the literature, this term is sometimes confined against the “deathbed visions” that are experienced by sick and infirm people in the final stage of the dying process. Moody, after having compared dozens of near-death accounts, describes several elements that NDEs typically consist of:

„A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval. After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a ‘body,’ but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before – a being of light – appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and

helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives“ (Moody 1975).

This model account – based on a catalog of recurring elements – was soon challenged by other researchers who extended or shortened it (cp. Knoblauch 1999). This fact shows that NDEs are by no means identical, but contain both similarities and differences regarding their content and sequence of elements.

Individuals experience their state of near-death as real and profound. Following an NDE, they often change their views, beliefs and values regarding their environment, fellow human beings, death and the hereafter. They often begin to strive for a more loving and more social way of life than before. In some people, NDEs seem to have enhanced intellectual or psychical abilities or have spontaneously cured diseases. Even some religious or spiritual movements are inspired by the experience of near-death. Negative after-effects are less frequently reported, e.g. the frustration of being confronted with everyday challenges again, or the feelings of loneliness due to the difficulties in sharing the experience with, and being understood by, related parties. And in the case of negative NDEs, individuals’

fear of dying may increase (Corazza 2008; Greyson 2006; Horacek 1997).

Explanations

The term “near-death” is unspecific insofar as it includes several elements that are found not only in NDEs but also in other altered states of consciousness. Near-death-like phenomena may be triggered by extreme fatigue, shamanic or meditation practices, centrifuge training for pilots (G-LOC syndrome), prolonged social isolation, sensory deprivation, dreams, mind-altering plants and substances (NDEs are reported to be induced by ketamine and dimethyltryptamine, DMT). In the literature, the similarities or differences between these experiences and the NDEs are highlighted, accepted or rejected, according to the author’s position (Corazza 2008; Strassman 2006; Grof/Halifax 1977; Moody 1975). Accordingly, several hypotheses about the nature and meaning of NDEs circulate today; none of them could be proven or rejected so far:

1) The biological theory

According to this materialistic theory, there is no consciousness or soul that could exist without the physical body. Elements of NDEs, therefore, are understood as different physiological processes in the moments of physical death: Lack of oxygen and the collapse of inhibitory mechanisms in the brain (over)stimulate the neuronal activity of the visual system and lead to the perception of light and tunnel-like shapes; stimulation of the limbic system and the release of neurotransmitters like endorphins are responsible for

experiences of analgesia, peace, love and euphoria; out-of-body experiences (OBE), life reviews and the perception of otherworldly landscapes are the results of the stimulation of the brain's temporal lobe, neurologically releasing memories and inducing hallucinations and processes of depersonalization. Skeptics further emphasize that the study of NDEs does not provide insights about death and possible forms of existence hereafter, because the temporary "clinical death" is not to be equated with final death (irreversible tissue death) (cp. n/a 2009; Blackmore 1993, 2005; Blackmore/Troscianko 1988).

2) The cultural historical explanation

Descriptions or investigations of the phenomenon of NDE often imply universalistic assumptions. Most prominent is the idea that all NDEs contain the same or similar elements or perceptions in the same or similar sequence. While biologists contribute to that idea by asserting the universal functioning of the brain, religiously or spiritually inspired individuals recognize similarities in NDEs across all cultures in order to confirm the universal truth of their respective versions of the hereafter.

Still, near-death researchers do not agree about which elements of NDEs are to be viewed as central or even universal. For the contents of NDE reports vary significantly, depending on time and place. For example, elements like OBE, movement in a tunnel and life review are typical for modern Western NDEs, but are negligible in reports about near-death states from the past or other cultures (Knoblauch 1999; Kellehear 1996). But cultural scientists also establish similarities in NDEs: In many

past and present cultures, individuals in states of near-death are likely to shift to other realms where they meet deceased relatives or supernatural beings. These other worlds have great similarities with the architecture, fashion and social structure of the individuals' everyday environment. Also, the religious entities that often appear in NDEs are known from the respective culture. This suggests, on the one hand, that NDEs are not independent from cultural specifics, while on the other hand, NDEs may have inspired traditional concepts of the afterlife. NDEs, thanatology, and the history of religion or culture seem to interact in a web of mutual influence (Shushan 2009; Corazza 2008; Athappilly et al. 2006; Knoblauch 1999; Kellehear 1996).

3) The survival theory

Both biological-reductionist and cultural history approaches negate or ignore the question about the continued existence of consciousness after physical death. For most people with a NDE, however, there is no doubt: They have directly experienced that death is not the end of their existence. They are supported by researchers such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring and others that understand NDEs as a strong indication – if not evidence – for the existence of human consciousness (spirit, soul) without the physical body (cp. Williams Cook et al. 1998). The survival theory is not tied to any specific religious or spiritual tradition. Even though NDEs may contain culturally shaped imagery, people concerned often are surprised that the experience did not meet their religious expectations (Moody 1975, cp. Corazza 2008). Still, individuals tend to interpret their NDE in terms of their religious background. Therefore, Christian believers

often find evidence of heaven and hell in their NDE; perception of intense light is often associated with God, Jesus or even – as some Christian critics suggest – with “Lucifer” (from Latin, “the bringer of light”) (Rawlings 1987; cp. Knoblauch 1999).



Figure 1: Dante and Beatrice gaze upon the Empyrean, the highest heaven. A NDE inspired or inspiring (?) scene from the “Divine Comedy” by Dante Alighieri, illustrated by Gustave Doré.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paradiso_Canto_31.jpg

4) The mystical or spiritual theory

Even without assuming a mind-body dualism and the survival theory, NDEs can be interpreted as spiritually relevant experiences. Elements like the experience of peace, love and feeling safe, the ineffability of the experience, the presence of a superhuman entity, the transcendence of time and space, the perception of a bright light or being of light – such aspects are similar to the descriptions of God experiences by visionary mystics of many cultures. One obvious difference is, of course,

that near-death experiencers usually did not look for mystical experiences (Grof/Halifax 1977; Zaleski 1993; Cressy 1994; Greyson 2006).

The ecstatic-entoptic theory

The ecstatic-entoptic view that I suggest is a variation of the mystical or spiritual theory, but also includes aspects of the other above mentioned explanatory approaches. It is based on the mystical teachings of an Emmental seer, Nestor, with whom I stayed and learned for many years (cp. Tausin 2009).

Ecstasy and the “navel”

To understand the ecstatic-entoptic interpretation of NDEs, we first have to know the role of ecstasy and entoptic phenomena in the teachings of Nestor.

According to him, human beings construct their own world by transforming energy into the concrete natural and cultural phenomena we know from our everyday lives. The flow and outcome of that transformation is shaped by our – psychologically and culturally influenced – state of consciousness. Through a certain style of life and practices, we can increase the flow of energy and free ourselves from bindings to worldly phenomena. As a consequence, the release of energy becomes increased and more direct by way of the prickle feelings of ecstasy. This, in turn, alters our cognition and perception. For example, abstract light phenomena will intensify and occur more frequently in our subjective field of vision. Nestor and his seer-friends report about a

network of luminous spheres and strings that he calls the 'shining structure of consciousness'. In an early stage of seeing and consciousness developing, these spheres and strings may be perceived as so-called "eye floaters" or "entoptic phenomena" (cp. Tausin 2012a). By releasing ecstatic energy through ecstasy, our consciousness moves forward in this shining structure. On this journey, we will reach our individual "navel" – a unique sphere to which we are attached. The Emmental seers assert that our consciousness involuntarily approaches and even enters the navel in states of intense consciousness and deep relaxation, as well as when falling asleep and when dying. Approaching the navel during lifetime is the goal of the mystic path in the shining structure (Tausin 2011a, 2010a, 2010b, 2009).

Thus, in terms of the ecstatic-entoptic view, dying means releasing all life energy from the body. In Western ancient and biblical tradition, this is called the *pneuma* or *spiritus*, breath or soul-as-breath, which leaves the body. In terms of physiology, this release is reflected by a massive random firing of neurons (cp. n/a 2009). In that process, visual perception changes significantly and may be roughly differentiated into two phases: In a first phase, individuals will see abstract light phenomena, e.g. moving in a structure of shining spheres and strings, or moving through a series of spheres or through a dark tunnel towards a shining sphere. In a second phase, when the release of energy decreases, these abstract light phenomena will turn into figurative images which are shaped by the culture and the living environment of the individual. This corresponds to the end of the flight of an individual consciousness, falling into a dream state and trying to construct a stable world again. These two

phases – a first abstract or light phase which gradually merges into a second, figurative phase – are especially known from cultures with shamanic traditions and experimental studies with hallucinogens (e.g. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, 1978; Lewis-Williams/Dowson 1988; cp. Tausin 2012b). The Tibetan Book of the Dead (*Bardo Thodol*) for example, influenced by the shamanic Bon tradition, states that the deceased will perceive the ‘clear light’ in the first *bardo* or intermediate state, then tends to experience figurative scenes; the text is read to the deceased in order to guide him through different illusory figurative images and encourage him to follow the clear light (Rinpoche 1996). A contemporary Western example of that two-phase psychedelic trip would be the final sequence of Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey:” Astronaut Dave Bowman flies through a stargate and experiences a stream of abstract and colored lights, slowly merging into landscapes and eventually into a full furnished cosmic hotel room, where he sees himself dying and being reborn.

The duration and intensity of the abstract phase depends on the individual consciousness: it is prolonged and more intense in energetic, open-minded and conscious individuals, whereas people less energetic and conscious will experience their (final) ecstasy rather as a series of figurative images. This general process does not exclude cases of abruptly changing consciousness states: This is suggested by NDE reports in which the sequence is reversed or figurative and abstract images alternate, e.g. the emergence of a redemptive light in “hell visions” (cp. Rawlings 1987), or, according to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the soul’s general ability to realize the clear light

even in the bardos which feature figurative images and visions.

Shining Structure Floaters in NDEs?

Thus, the ecstatic-entoptic theory suggests that the abstract contents of visual perception in NDEs correspond to seeing entoptic phenomena in altered states of consciousness. To support the thesis, we will have a closer look at that content and its similarities to one particular type of entoptics, the shining structure floaters.

Abstract forms – spheres and tubes

The typical structures of floaters occur in several NDE elements. For example, there are descriptions of tubular or thread-like structures. Rawlings, for example, describes the experience of a man in the following words:

“Moving at high speed through a net of great luminosity, he described going through what appeared to be a grid of luminous strands. After he stopped, this vibrant luminosity became blinding in intensity and drained him of energy. There was no pain and no unpleasant sensation. The grid had transformed him into a form beyond time and space” (Rawlings 1991).

Another element is the psychic “umbilical cord,” noted by Robert Crookall, a British pioneer in the clinical study of NDEs. Experiencers repeatedly report about an elastic “cord” or “thread” that appears between them and their

physical body. In his interpretation, Crookall draws attention to similar phenomena in the Tibetan culture – a “strand” subsisting between the soul body and the physical body – and to the “silver cord” mentioned in Ecclesiastes 12:5-7. According to him, this cord connects the individual consciousness or soul with the physical body (cp. Steiger/Steiger 2003; n/a 2010a). Again another and frequently mentioned element is moving through a tubular structure that might correspond to the ‘shining structure’ of consciousness. According to the ecstatic-entoptic thesis, it is reasonable to assume a continuity between the abstract and the rather figurative forms of this tubular structure: Depending on the individual level or state of consciousness, the soul’s movement through the shining structure may be experienced in a rather abstract (tube, tunnel) or figurative (path, river etc.) way (cp. Shushan 2009; Athappilly et al. 2006; Knoblauch 1999; Kellehear 1996). I therefore assume that the tunnel experience is a central NDE element throughout history and culture. In any case, the famous painting “Ascent of the Blessed” by Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516) proves that the tunnel experience is known for centuries.



Figure 2: Hieronymus Bosch: Ascent of the Blessed (1500-1504), oil on wood, 87x40 cm

The tunnel in this image shows some details which lead to considering the other floater shape, the sphere: Bosch's tunnel is divided into several segments. This corresponds to the many NDE reports in which the segments or walls of the tunnel are experienced as spheres (e.g. "spherical," "round" etc.). One of Moody's interviewees said that after a feeling of peace and quite, she found herself "in a tunnel – a tunnel of concentric circles" (Moody 1975). Similarly, German singer and near-death experiencer Anke Hachfeld (Mila Mar, MiLù) describes this tunnel as „illuminated by bright light, spatially limited by soft, round, foam-like forms;“ she composes: "I have flown through colored soft spheres" (Anke n/a).

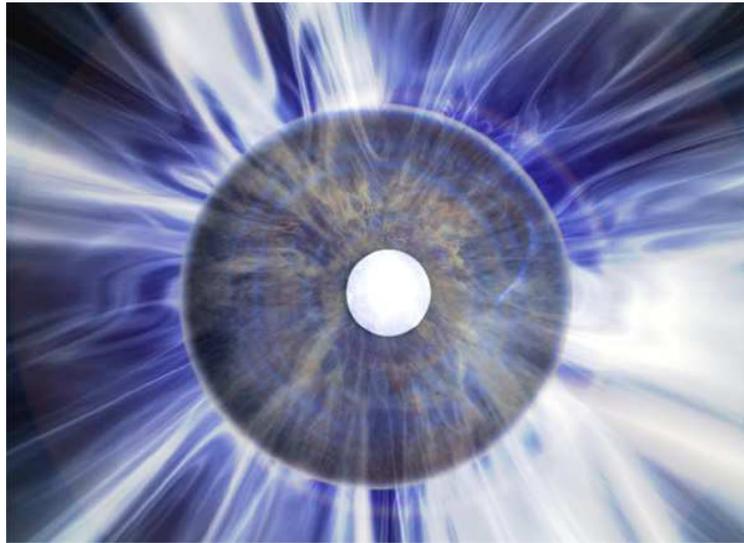


Figure 3: Reaching the shining sphere at the end of the tunnel.

<http://www.klarblicker.de/paranormal/durchdaslicht.html>

(19.1.11)

Even outside this tube or tunnel, (concentric) spheres or rows of spheres are mentioned in NDEs. This is supported by the investigation of the relationship between NDEs and so-called orbs; orbs are transparent luminous spheres on photographs that are often interpreted as the souls of the dead (cp. McFetridge 2008; Williams 2007; Tausin 2007, 2008). Fact is that luminous and colored spheres are frequently witnessed in NDEs, sometimes along with the perception of figurative images like buildings or human-like beings. Also, the beings of light are often experienced as luminous and mobile spheres which sometimes change their shape to anthropomorphic figures. Some experiencers even report about „millions of spheres of light” (Williams 2007).



Figure 4: Scene from the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Papyrus Anhai): The mummy lies on the topmost step of the heavenly stairway and observes the “depths of space,” symbolized by eight white disks on a blue ground – shining spheres in the afterlife? (Champdor 1977).

The sphere is not only associated with the tunnel and the being of light, but also with the experiencers’ body: During a NDE, individuals realize that they have a new body with expanded capabilities of cognition, perception and movement. This body may be shaped as both, a human being or a sphere – it also may transform from one into the other. Some near-death experiencers also

feel themselves enveloped in a sphere (cp. Williams 2007; Rawlings 1987; Moody 1975).

Light and Darkness



Figure 5: Light in the darkness.

<http://diggapic.com/pictures/iands.org> (19.1.11)

Light and darkness are also key elements that are mentioned in both modern NDE and ancient beliefs about the afterlife (Shushan 2009). Often, the perception or sensation of darkness is associated with the fall of the soul and the underworld or hell. In contrast, light symbolizes the ascent of the soul and the heavenly abodes. Light and darkness seem to be separated, but both may occur in the same visual scene. For example, a light may appear in the darkness, often described as a clear white light that intensifies when the individual approach it. Also, the light may be accompanied by figurative and concrete imagery – some experiencers personalize the light as a divine being and remember having had a kind of mental conversation with this light. Similar processes are observed with floaters: Both light

and darkness are part of the shining structure, as the core-surround principle divides the structure into light and dark areas. Therefore, floaters may be experienced as dark, as opacities (of the vitreous). But as stated above, the more ecstatic energy is given into this structure – depending on the intensity of the consciousness – the more luminous it becomes. It is possible that these energy-related perceptions of light and darkness continue in NDEs.

The motion (zoom effect, jumps)

In intense states of consciousness and moments of ecstasy, “zoom effects” may occur in the visual perception (Tausin 2010a): A perceived object lights up and “zooms in” rather abruptly. The Emmmental seers understand that phenomenon as the forward movement of the consciousness in the shining structure, towards the navel. In NDEs, when consciousness leaves the physical body, “zoom effects” are experienced frequently. E.g. when flowing or flying through the tunnel, or through a dark area towards a bright light. Sometimes, individuals experiences this effect in an earlier stage, when still seeing earthly things (cp. Moody 1975), others see or feel spheres approaching to them (Jinny 2010). Beings of light, often in the form of spheres, also are experienced as highly mobile, “bouncing” or “swirling” (Williams 2007). These examples indicate continuity from the advanced seeing of shining structure floaters to the luminous spheres appearing in NDEs.

Conclusion

The abstract elements of NDEs have many parallels to entoptic phenomena. It is therefore possible that phenomena like shining structure floaters are perceived in states of near-death. If entoptic phenomena are understood in terms of physiology, NDEs would indeed have a biological or physiological dimension (cp. Tausin 2011b). It would be wrong, however, to reduce NDEs to physiology. We do not know whether physiological processes are the cause or the effect of consciousness, or whether we better understand them as just another level of expression of consciousness. Correspondingly, it is possible that the perception of so-called entoptic phenomena continues even without the physical body. Altered states of consciousness like dreams, mystical rapture and – as pointed out in this article – NDEs suggest that shining structure floaters are a consciousness phenomenon which can be experienced with another, more subtle body. If so, then we experience some kind of NDE when observing or meditating on shining structure floaters. In other words: In focusing on floaters and investigating their nature, we are dealing with something that seems to persist not only in life, but beyond.

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(Spiritual Fiction. ISBN: 978-3033003378. Paperback, 15.2 x 22.9 cm / 6 x 9 inches, 368 pages).

Floco Tausin tells the story about his time of learning with spiritual teacher and seer Nestor, taking place in the hilly region of Emmental, Switzerland. The mystic teachings focus on the widely known but underestimated dots and strands floating in our field of vision, known as eye floaters or *mouches volantes*. Whereas in ophthalmology, floaters are considered a harmless vitreous opacity, the author gradually learns about them to see and reveals the first emergence of the shining structure formed by our consciousness.

»Mouches Volantes« explores the topic of eye floaters in a much wider sense than the usual medical explanations. It merges scientific research, esoteric philosophy and practical consciousness development, and observes the spiritual meaning and everyday life implications of these dots and strands.

»Mouches Volantes« – a mystical story about the closest thing in the world.